

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING MUSICAL

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In the Western tradition of education, of which RIS is a part, excellence in academics and character-building go hand in hand. Not only does a student need to excel in the various academic disciplines such as English, Math, and the Sciences: he/she also must grow as a person—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. That is because being well-equipped for the intellectual demands of life is hardly sufficient to fare well in our increasingly competitive global society. RIS fosters such an education through establishing and promoting the Expected School-wide Learning Results (ESLRs), which outlines six core values, or “outcomes” which students will (hopefully) acquire by the time they graduate.

But values such as honesty, responsibility, and compassion can hardly be taught like a math equation, with its orderly logic, or the dates and events in History. Values—the kind that matters, the kind which extends beyond Values Class—can neither be memorized, calculated, analyzed nor tested for acquisition. How then, do children acquire the emotional intelligence, that fineness of character so crucial to a successful and fulfilling life?

A significant part lies with the motives and efforts of the students themselves. But the ivory tower also does its best to instill such character into its fleeting entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, politicians, artists and entertainers through what many educators call the hidden curriculum. The underlying principle behind the hidden curriculum is that learning goes on outside, as well as inside the classroom. Unintentionally, almost unconsciously, students learn the lessons of life, and to a certain extent the attitudes the school have towards life and living well. A great learning opportunity is music, the hallmark of Western, and perhaps of any sound education.

There have been numerous studies conducted which show a correlation between musical studies and superior

academic performance. Of course, correlation does not necessarily mean causation. Nonetheless, there is a growing consensus that musical studies may endow one with more than a greater appreciation of Haydn, to be mentioned in passing at cocktail parties. Musical students performing in such contrasting disciplines as math and foreign languages suggest that on a fundamental level, music develops intellectual capacity. Thus, although the pursuit of a musical education may seem long and arduous, the fruits of such labor will certainly be worth every minute.

The performing arts or music program here at RIS is long-established, and can be divided into two categories: choir and band. Within each category students can choose from a number of courses, each with a different difficulty level.

In the band category, there is Beginning Band, Concert Band, Stage Wind Ensemble and Jazz Band. In each and every band program, apart from learning how to play an instrument, band students also learn, first and foremost, commitment and citizenship, and later discipline, tenacity, teamwork, compassion and empathy. Once a commitment is made, they must make every effort to honor that commitment. They are also aware that they shoulder a responsibility to practice their individual part and make it the best it can be. You can see very clearly the repercussions of your choices—whether to come to practice, or to practice your individual part. Even the most indolent of players have a certain amount of discipline and tenacity in pursuing their musical studies. If one member fails to fulfill their part, the entire piece becomes incomplete, and the band is affected. The whole affair ceases to be about a single individual. It is about our small community of fleeting musicians, about being a good member of a community and working together as a team, which in turn fosters compassion and empathy. If everybody does their part sincerely, the individual voices become a unified, harmonious voice. In other words, a “Union of Hearts”.

The “Union of Hearts” analogy extends beyond simply playing together correctly. Music is a form of self-expression, as well as technically demanding. There is a formalized, scientific component to music, as well as an aesthetic. Together, students learn to face the challenges presented to them, and appreciate music in all its complexity and beauty. Music is also a language unto itself, without words which are misleading, but one which transcends cultural, social, intellectual boundaries and speaks clearly and honestly to everyone—young or old, big or small. Through a mutual understanding which is nurtured and developed over time, band members learn to anticipate each other, or the direction of the band during a piece without ever interrupting.